

# Mendip Caving Group

# NEWS

NUMBER 208

NOVEMBER 1989

## DORDOGNE 89, THE CAUSSE DE GRAMAT

by Brian Murlis

The three of us, Brian Murlis, Steve Redwood and Vince Simmonds eventually arrived at the campsite near Gramat, on the Massif Central, after an eight hour ferry delay and a thirteen hour drive through France, stopping only to change drivers or to get a quick bite to eat. It was twelve thirty at night and we had started off from Mendip at 6pm the previous day.

Our next problem was to locate the CDG, SWCC and MCG lot that we were supposed to be meeting, who had already been there for a few days. Bearing in mind it was pitch black and the campsite was large, covering an area of about ten acres, and wooded, we eventually located some English cars. After being told to belt up by the familiar voice of Nick Geh we realised we were in the right place. Already at the camp were Nick Geh, John Adams, Pat Cronin, Mike McDonald (Trebor), Digger Hastilow, Pete Harvey and John and Pat's wives. Tony and Denise Knibbs were to join us later in the week.

We pitched camp under car headlights and petzl microlights then turned in for a long deserved sleep. The morning dawned sunny and warm to reveal just how good the campsite facilities were, including a small swimming pool.

Still being tired from the previous day we decided to take it easy and have a drive around to get to know the area. It is not unlike Mendip to look at, just a lot bigger and more picturesque. We eventually found ourselves at Fontaine St. George (Ed. that name seems familiar!) near the Dordogne River, one of the most famous resurgences in the area, so armed with a couple of baguettes and a pack of beer we spent the afternoon diving into, then rapidly getting out of the sizeable and freezing resurgence pool.

The next day we got down to some proper caving. The first cave we visited was:

### SOUFFRE DE REVEILLON

This cave is famous for its' spectacular entrance, approx. 150ft x 150ft, and must take a massive stream in wet weather. The huge entrance chamber narrows down to a 20ft x 20ft stream passage which can easily be followed passing deep clear pools, and down climbs, to a low muddy area, with plenty of wildlife, mainly toads. We followed an upper series into some quite well decorated small passages and some large chambers to a drop down of 30ft with a fixed handline with a notice at the top that nobody understood. The drop led to a miserable section of wet and muddy crawling, reminiscent of Mendip, to finish at a tricky climb requiring a hand line so we turned back yearning after the large passages we had been in previously. Back at the fixed rope we think we worked out what the notice at the top said - something like: DON'T GO DOWN THIS ROPE BECAUSE IT'S BLOODY IMPOSSIBLE TO GET BACK UP AGAIN!!! And it very nearly was.

Back at the low muddy area we found our way to the large continuing streamway, down a 10ft pitch, another 35ft pitch then a climb up opposite leading into a large well decorated fossil passage 200ft long. The main passage continues down short climbs, through pools, to a point where the sump usually is but due to the very dry conditions it continued through a low series of muddy passages and climbs to a final sump. There is a large overhead chamber in the lower section of the cave, called Les Grandes Salles, but we did not find the right climb up to it as there were so many to choose from.

(cont. on p4)

## DORDOGNE 89, THE CAUSSE DE GRAMAT

(cont. from page 1) That afternoon we did our second cave:

GOUFFRE DE ROQUE-DE-COR

This cave, like the Reveillon, is close to the road. It is situated in a massive doline, 150ft deep. An obvious path leads down the stream bed route, into the doline and to the very wide, low bedding entrance of the cave. A short section of crawling and stooping soon leads to a large dry stream passage which continues for about half a mile to a sump, passing some good formations on the way. There are no significant side passages in this cave.

The following day we set our sights on doing three caves, Les Vitarelles, Perte De theminee and Gouffre De Theminettes, all being in the same area, or so we were led to believe! We found the cave that we took to be Les Vitarelles but it was only a soakaway in the middle of a field. We obviously had the wrong place as Vitarelles is supposed to be a pothole entrance into a major streamway. So we went to our next objective!

PERTE DE THEMINEE

This cave is situated virtually in the middle of the village of Theminee at the end of a deep, blind, very flood prone valley. The cave is extremely flood prone as can be seen by the flood debris jammed high up in the roof throughout. It is also the best cave we visited. The entrance, a small hole back from the end of the valley, soon leads to a 20ft ladder pitch then a small passage (by French standards, large by Mendip) continues for a little way to the main streamway. This can be followed, wading and swimming (wetsuit essential), for several hundred feet to a sump. A climb just before the sump leads to a very large fossil passage. Turning left into this passage leads to some well decorated chambers, then on down to meet the streamway again in a large domed chamber. Following the stream through large sculptured passage again leads to a sump. Just before this a steep mud and gravel slope leads up to another very large fossil passage. To the right the passage floor is extremely muddy, the mud being up to 4ft deep and innocently overlaid by 6ins of water. The further we went along it the worse it got. Somewhere in there was the gloop monster waiting to suck your wellies off, or worse! Retreating, we followed the passage to the left which continued very large past big gour, deep pools and some fine large formations for several hundred feet. The passage enlarges to a big chamber which drops down to a deep pool. Left is a crawl leading to a sump but swimming to the right across the deep pool leads to a continuation of the large passage with still more superb formations, but eventually ending at a sump.

Retracing our footsteps back to the first large fossil passage that we climbed into before the first sump, we decided to explore the other two ways on. Right led us to a complex of crawling smaller passages but straight on led to a climb down into a larger passage and on to split into several ways on. We tried every one, most closing down fairly quickly, but there was always one that continued and split again, gradually getting smaller and leading us to believe that they were degenerating into small inlet passages. Just on the verge of turning back, we decided to look at the final hopeless-looking crawl. It ducked down under a blind low arch to suddenly open out into a magnificent gour passage disappearing into the distance and getting bigger all the time. Each very large gour pool was succeeded by another and another, all with deep crystal clear green water, necessitating swimming across in most cases - it was a cavers' dream. After several hundred feet we suddenly emerged into a beautiful immense chamber over 100ft high and wide and around 200ft long. The formations were huge and breathtaking. A climb up an obvious mud slope led to a balcony giving panoramic views around the chamber and a handline to a still higher superb extension with a beautiful forest of stalagmites as its centrepiece.

It was while in these chambers that the words of sceptics came back to us. "Why do you go underground, I don't see what you see in it", and "What do you want to go to the Dordogne for, I've been there and there's nothing there worth doing". The beauty and immensity of these chambers left us feeling very insignificant and totally spellbound. On leaving the chambers we continued on down the gour streamway for a few more hundred feet with the gour pools increasing in size, when it suddenly ended at an extremely large gour pool and a 30ft drop down to the main streamway, which we presumed must be downstream of the furthest sump we had been to. The climb down needed a handline which unfortunately we didn't have, so the exploration of a further stretch of main streamway was denied to us, but we will return!

Retracing our steps we managed to avoid getting caught by the gour monster and exited the cave after a superb five hours, feeling truly exhilarated. Tony and Denise Knibbs, Pete Harvey, Digger Hastilow and Nick Geh visited this cave a couple of days later on our enthusiastic recommendation but unfortunately they failed to find the gour passage that we had found.

Needless to say, we didn't have time to do the third cave, Gouffre de Theminettes, but we did locate the entrance, completely covered in flood debris (trees, etc)!

The next day we drove over to do:

#### IGUE ST. SOL

"Igue" is the local word for surface shaft and there are hundreds of them in this area, some blind and some dropping into main streamways or in the case of Igue St. Sol a massive horizontal passage. This was our longest walk, about 1km up a hill, in the shade luckily. The shaft is in a wood surrounded by a fence. A large tree on the uphill side of the hole gives a good belay for a decent down a muddy 45deg. slope to the edge of the shaft. Here another tree overhangs the shaft and gives a freehang for 60ft to a ledge. A choice of rebelays here either gives a freehang of 150ft or so to the bottom or 80ft to a rebelay followed by a final 80ft. We took the latter route. The decent is a fine one in an oval Yorkshire-style shaft landing on the top of a large mud cone to the side of a massive horizontal passage up to 50 x 50ft. Around the bottom of the mud cone are several World War 2 parachute cases obviously dumped by the Resistance.

This superb passage goes either way for a total length of over half a mile. It contains a multitude of magnificent formations most of which are brilliant white and consist of immense columns from floor to roof some of which have collapsed due to their size and weight. Huge bosses, stalagmite forests up to 10ft tall, beautiful curtains, crystal grottos, etc - the further we advanced, the more beautiful it became. At the terminal dig there are some very artistic mud sculptures, among them are Land Rovers, cave divers, cavers, devils and loads of phallics. The other end of the passage also ends at a mud choke which links with the nearby Lacave show cave. Due to the cave temperature and the dry nature of the cave we wore just furry suits and even then we were too hot.

On the return walk from this cave we had a look at:

#### GROTTE DE COMBE-CULLIER

This is a very insignificant cave for this area but is still part of the Lacave-Igue St. Sol system. Insignificant it may be but it still had a main passageway 12 x 12ft disappearing into the hillside for a few hundred feet with interesting side passages. Quite a major cave in Mendip terms.

The next day, our final caving day, we visited:

#### GOUFFRE DU SAUT DE LA PUCELLE

This cave is situated at the end of a deep dry valley right next to the main road. It is a walking size (15 x 15ft) arched entrance remaining like this for a couple of hundred feet to a duck. Here a climb leads to a huge fossil passage which after a while leads via some low passage to the main streamway. This streamway is superb and is obviously the Swildons of the Dordogne. It is followed for several kilometres down loads of short pitches and cascades. There are numerous deep pools to swim across (taking care that the pool monster does not get you) and some fine formations, as well as a dead fish called Colin who made a hundred feet of passageway very unpleasant. Generally the passageway is of large proportions and makes for a very enjoyable trip. At the terminal sump there is a plaque in memory of E.A. Martel who first explored the cave one hundred years before, in 1889. Great fun was had leaping into deep pools, such to the surprise of two French parties there at the time who were trying to stay dry by traversing around all the wet bits - without much success. Amazingly, the French were SRT-ing all the pitches, non being more than 25ft and quite a few free climbable. We used five ladders in total out of around 10 pitches. If the water had been running faster more ladders or aids would have been required. The whole trip took around five hours.

While the three of us had been doing these caves, the others had been doing mainly diving which they reported was superb, "underwater passages the size of Aggy mainstream passage with crystal clear water", was one quote. Reports of their trips will be in CDG write ups no doubt.

The Dordogne is a superb caving area with a great variety of caves. Gramat is a good base as the campsite is good, the town has a couple of large supermarkets and a selection of bars, tourist shops, etc. We didn't drive more than 10 miles to a cave, or walk more than a kilometre to an entrance. Unfortunately we only had eight days, three of which were spent travelling and one resting - leaving us only four caving days. For this reason we visited caves for which we had been supplied information so that we did not waste valuable time. The weather stayed hot and sunny except on the last day when we were trying to break camp and it poured down. Many thanks to Rob Taviner (WCC) for supplying us with the area information and maps.